Ethno-spirituality: A postcolonial problematic?

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Abstract:
This article explores the nature of spirituality in African traditions, for which we use the term ethno-spirituality. We examine the assumptions and effects of western missionaries, and how African spirituality negotiated with these new ideas and merged the new with the traditional. It problematises the relationship between Christianity in Africa and indigenous beliefs from disrespect for local religions, using terms such as animism, fetishism and paganism, to a more recent and respectful emphasis on whether we all have things to learn from each other. A particular case study is offered of San spirituality, exploring San story, the healing dance, ideas of spirits and deities, and transcendence. It concludes with a discussion of dialogue and hermeneutics around descriptions of God drawn out of philosophical work by Paul Ricoeur. It advocates a re-evaluation of San story, belief and practice as expressive of spiritual experience.

Keywords: San spirituality, existential myth, religious language, syncretism, religious hermeneutics.

Ethno-spirituality.

Terms such as ethno-botany, ethno-musicology and even ethno-mathematics have academic pedigrees. Although ethno-spirituality is not newly coined here (there are popular usages), it has no academic tradition. It describes the discourse about spiritual matters found in traditional, pre-scientific communities. The term spirituality is contested. I argue elsewhere that it is different from religious belief (Bigger, 2007: 60-64); indeed religion can be anti-spiritual, and controlling rather than empowering. Spirituality often focuses upon non-material forces, such as spirits and unseen powers. This, whether taken literally or metaphorically, is a way of contemplating and responding to life, the world, ourselves and our relationships, dealing with meaning, mystery, and causation. Spirituality is explanatory in ways different from objective description and can be studied phenomenologically as reflections on everyday life. This article draws on studies of the San of southern Africa because their experience of modernisation has been different from that of settled groups who engaged with long-term Christian missions (although the interactions between San and missionaries are no less significant). The discussion explores how the San have expressed meaning, mystery and reflection on life and being; what this means for the study of spirituality; and what this might mean socially and politically for San identity today.

If the colonialist enterprise represented colonized peoples as subjects, the missionary enterprise represented them as spiritually ignorant and superstitious, needing education

and civilisation (Etherington, 2005: 6-8). Settled groups were influenced by mission schools and stations from the early nineteenth century onwards. Lord Hailey's *African Survey* of 1938 estimated that nine-tenths of all African education was in missions (Etherington, 2005: 11-12) and anthropologists bemoaned the fact that indigenous peoples were becoming westernised and 'their' raw material was disappearing (Moore, 1994: 1-7; Olivier de Sardan, 2005:42-57). It was clear however that the change process itself is worthy of study. Franz Fanon linked resistance to the reversion to fossilised traditions (Cherki, 2006 p.144), opposing the colonisers' assumptions of uncivilised barbarism stressing continuity between Africa's past and future (Fanon, 1967/1961: 187).

Syncretism is a loaded word describing the mixing of one faith with another, hinting disapproval. The biblical prophets attacked apostacy, so missionaries assumed syncretism to be wrong. For converts to 'backslide', "to relapse into heathenism" (SPGFP, 1900: 47) was declared to be normal. In other words, Africans opposed the dominant voice, the hegemony of the west, and found their own voice by incorporating traditional beliefs and concepts. Stewart and Shaw (1994: 19-23, 46-65) comment that condemning indigenous belief as being of the devil had the effect of validating local belief in the reality of devils, spirits and deities. For missionaryies from the colonial power to believe that indigenous deities are powerful (and powerful spiritual enemies) strengthened dualistic belief. The missionary argument thus had an unexpected long-lasting consequence.

Georges Balandier (1955: 432) moved away from the convert/backslider dichotomy by talking about 'a third term' – neither the coloniser's religion, nor traditional religion, but a new construct with roots in both (Moore, 1994: 99-103). In this he presages Homi Bhabha's (1994) *third space* in which dialogue between colonised and coloniser moves into an in-between hybrid discourse. John Mbiti (1969:1-21) promoted a 'transfused' civil religion drawing from both traditional beliefs and Christianity to emphasise moral responsibility. This might be termed *syncrenism*, the fusing of Christianity and indigenous spirituality. Peggy Brock, (in Etherington, 2005: 133) quoting Susan Neylan's *The Heavens are Changing* (p.130) on Tsimshian protestant missions in Canada comments:

> the complex realities of people experiencing revolutionary change in their spiritual and material worlds... 'demonstrate not just "inbetweenness" but the multiple identities of Native missionaries'.

Neylan (2003:6) comments that missions were "sites of contested meaning". It was dialogue with attitude on both sides, but not one in which the holder of power, the coloniser, could easily win.

Ethno-spirituality starts with the assumption that indigenous peoples were not ignorant savages but potentially wise within their level of knowledge. Missionary accounts obfuscate the picture as they were out of their intellectual and cultural depth and were indoctrinated into a hegemonic view of the value of western Christianity. Over two centuries they subtly interfered with indigenous beliefs so we cannot posit a historic pure African pre-Christian faith. Lack of scientific education and knowledge encouraged

elemental speculation about ourselves, the environment, weather, and heavens which over time would have adapted to new knowledge. Our task is to re-evaluate this traditional wisdom without Christian or colonial assumptions.

Missionary colonial agendas.

The spiritual heritage of Africa is rich and complex, but was obscured various colonialist agendas of missionaries, educators and politicians. In Africa, religion was one aspect of otherness, seen within a racialised world-view. Missionaries went to Africa and other colonies both to convert and to civilise; European powers went to exploit. Europeans brought with them healthcare and schools, the first to fix the body, the second to fix the soul as reading enabled the indigenous people to read the Bible. So Christianity came to the colonies as a complex package. Europeans also came with attitude. The indigenous people were, they believed, primitive, savage, and primitive. Such descriptions can be found in the titles of social scientists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown (see the discussion in Moore, 1994: 29-47).

The effects of missionary activity are complex, examined for example in a range of papers brought together by Norman Etherington (2005), cited above. Etherington (pp.1-18) sees tension between missionaries and political colonisers, with missionaries not considered important in the broader colonising process, and sometimes regarded as a problem, accused for example of educating 'natives' beyond their menial status (p.9). Missionaries sought to replace local beliefs and culture with their own set of teachings, mythology, rules and values. They saw 'other' as evil that had to be tackled by confrontation, replacing indigenous spirituality rather than exploring it. Chapter 8 'Trained to Tell the Truth' (Gareth Griffiths), describes how 'native' life stories (testimonies) were constructed for missionary journals. Its title quotes a missionary who tells how difficult it was to train converts, and one in particular, not to lie but to tell the story 'properly'. This reveals an oppressive imposition of western voice over indigenous voice: the girl in question was bitter about being bullied not to say what she really thought. John Barker comments elsewhere (in Etherington, 2005: 101) about "the missionaries' inability to convince even themselves that Pacific Islanders and Africans could be their equals".

Paul Landau (chapter 10, on ' Language'), offers a significant discussion of how missionaries translated their message into local languages. They leave a legacy of literacy which was a mixed blessing. To make Christian teaching understandable, indigenous terms were needed which had pre-existing meanings. In 1813, John Campbell of the London Missionary Society working among the Tswana chose the name Modimo to translate God (p.207), which was the source of huge misunderstandings, as it primarily referred to The Ancestor. This choice of term imported the fine detail of ancestor reverence into what the local people thought Campbell and his colleagues were teaching them. Landau concludes:

> Missionaries' lasting textual imprint has also been to primitivise and tribalise peoples in their own histories, construing their pasts as enchanted or superstitious.

> Not only popular insurgencies, but the forces of diffusion and oppression, have (re)occupied Christianity's vocabulary (p.213)

Redefining language and its signifiers had the unintended consequence of confirming supernatural and superstitious conclusions and remythologising ancestry and tribal identity. The tribal aetiologies of *Genesis*, highlighting Abraham, Adam and God as ancestors were re-enacted in Africa through Bible study, reaffirming old beliefs in ancestors, and validating political structures through religion. Adrian Hastings (1994:458) agrees: the Bible was accepted because it was "so comprensively supernaturalist, so supportive of beliefs in spirits of various sorts".

Issues for the study of religion

Religion and spirituality are both problematic activities, the former to do with practice and organisation, the latter with transcendent and transformative experiences. Much is currently being written on their relationship and the gap between concept and reality (De Vreis, 2008; Roehlkeptartain et al., 2006, Bigger 2007; Bigger, 2008). The relationship between religion and knowledge is problematic. Religious experience is categorically different from religious practice, but visions and emotionalism are problematic in themselves, some rooted in medical conditions (see Fontana, 2003 for a recent study of psychology of religion). That people believe conceptually in the divine is no guarantee of its objective reality, but the concept might relate to deeper realities (or 'phenomena' that are at the heart of phenomenology). It is in the ontology of *self and other* that psychology and spirituality collide. 'Other' is important if religion is to be ethical and not narcissistic. Relationships with those defined as 'other' can be special, respectful and significant; or they can be bigoted, oppressive, exploitative, dismissive and lacking in human dignity. The self-other link is therefore where ethics and morality begin, and where issues of diversity are encountered.

To treat African religion as a single entity (Mbiti, 1975: 1-21) obscures the fact that 'African' religion is plural and diverse. Since this attempt at systematic theology comes at the end of two centuries of Christian provision of education, the search for the hidden Christ in African religion may be a post-colonial reaction. The search for synthesis could create a new hegemony. African academics are similarly exploring 'African Philosophy' (Rettová, 2007:27-46). Ethno-spirituality is in contrast diverse, searching beneath beliefs in supernatural powers to rediscover symbolic rationality. Thus for example the idea of the spirit of the earth (Awolalu, 1979: 45-51) is capable of rich utility in today's world concerned about the environment.

Definitions of spirituality embed beliefs in the spirit world and the supernatural. Sir Edward Tylor labelled as *animism* the belief in souls or spirits in living things and the environment, regarding this as the most primitive, early evolutionary stage of religion. Tylor's evidence came from missionary ethnology (Harries, in Everington, 2005:238-260), a tainted evidence stream viewing traditional cultures through dogmatic eyes. Some indigenous people may have lived up to the low expectations set on them, so seeming to strengthen the initial misreading. Respect for ancestors was a common feature of tribal belief; indeed what happened after death encouraged speculation on which religion was

based (Bigger, 2003: 14-15), but Tylor derided this as ancestor *worship*. The concept of holiness had an approved side, as spiritual experience of the numinous, after Rudolph Otto's *Das Heilige*, (1917), the full German title meaning *The Holy - On the Irrational in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*[1]. However, primitive superstition was described through the Fijian term *tabu* (taboo) for anything forbidden, including spaces which were held invioble and special. Today, some sacred sites are being returned to their indigenous owners. The task today is to rethink and reinterpret these experiential terms as expressive rather than superstitious.

Finally, pre-scientific people misunderstood causation. It was easy to think that every disaster has a cause, and that pacifying an assumed causal agents (such as ancestors) might solve the problem. Aspects of magic and witchcraft came from here, with rituals to appease the elemental causes and angry spirits (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). We do not know how much of this was traditional, and how much influenced by missionary reifications, but it should be sufficient to say that mistaking causation is part of the human condition. Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1935/1987) solidified the idea that magic preceded religion as an evolutionary stage. However, belief in angels, demons, an afterlife and rituals are found worldwide, regardless of the availability of education. Uncertainty about the former certainties of science are a feature of postmodernity, but returning to pre-modern (pre-scientific) beliefs is not the only response. Alice Lenshina's Lumpa Church in Northern Rhodesia in 1953, which promised strong medicine against witchcraft (Robert Edgar, in Etherington, 2005: 235), seems little different from western popular 'spiritual' panaceas which promise spiritual health through guardian angels, crystals and sound bowls. Both are under-educated and misconceptualised, but are found persuasive by their adherents.

Myths are a form of fantasy. Fantasy literature today allows readers to suspend belief and read on as if the fantasy is true. With this willing suspension of disbelief (as Coleridge termed it), life issues, values and concepts can be explored creatively to see if it helps us to view our world differently. So too with myth, folktale, performance and elemental reifications. We can 'read' the symbolism of myths without the need to interpret them literally. We can understand the world as meaningful without taking absolutely literally that it was created in six days (Genesis 1.1-2.4), or that it came from a cosmic egg (the Hindu Vayu Purana 4.74-75). The existential meaning is that we reverence life as created, meaningful, beautiful and worthwhile. Beliefs are adaptable. Sharon Hutchinson's anthropological study of the Nuer of Sudan, a longitudinal re-examination of a people studied by Evans-Pritchard (1956; full bibliography in Hutchinson, 1996: 368-9), showed how animal sacrifice was once *respectful killing* for food; but was reinterpreted by Christians as wasting a food resource (1996: 299-350).

The San

The San's spiritual tradition lies outside of the 'African religion' generalisation. A body of primary texts and interpretive studies are available. San spirituality provides therefore a case study that can shed new light onto the study of spirituality in Africa. Given the richness of the academic literature on the San, this survey cannot be exhaustive. San means 'outsider', an ancient name which separated nomadic hunter-gathers from settled

tribes. The term 'Bushmen' has been used in both derogatory and honorific ways. Once widely spread geographically and linguistically, with group names such as !Kung and Ju|'hoansi, their history is characterised by repression and oppression (e.g. Gall, 2001:163-182, the best of journalistic accounts). Their experience of missionaries was less than settled villagers, and they took advantage of mission resources where offered (McDonald, 2009). They are still often represented as modern-day stone age exhibits, to their disadvantage. The San lived[2] close to nature, with hand-made technology, feeding off the land as hunter-gatherers. They have been of immense interest to westerners (Barnard, 2007: 23-37), starting with the frenzy of evolutionism[3] which represented them as a vestige of an earlier evolutionary stage. Jane Taylor and Laurens van der Post celebrated 'Bushman' culture, working towards a better future (Van Der Post and Taylor, 1984: 120, 123-170[4]). San stories and folklore collected by the Bleek family (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911) remains an invaluable archive of a now lost culture. Andrew Bank (2006) tells the story of this family; Pippa Skotnes has artistically reproduced many parts of it with wide-ranging analysis, stemming from "a love affair with an archive (2007: 41). Megan Biesele, magisterial in Bushman studies, recorded !Kung examples (in Lee and DeVore 1998:302-324). The distinction between humans and animals is blurred. The deities behave as humans, arguing with their wives and having tricks played on them in power reversals. San life can be unpredictable so regarding some deities as wilful tricksters is fully comprehensible. Is this myth, fantasy, imagination or fallacious science?

The eland was held in special regard, and appears on rock paintings of animals, the hunts, and trance healing dances. David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce (2004) demonstrate the antiquity both of the San rock art, and of San spirituality depicted in it. They emphasise the prestige conferred through the claim to shamanic powers (p.193) and the ways this shaped the community (pp. 185-204). The emphasis on body transformations, into animals for example explain the human/animal figures in rock paintings, and point to a fluidity of everyday thought whereby one thing could actual be or become another (pp. 159-184).

Bushmen stories are told mainly by the elderly who are valued for their experience of life. These stories are playful, earthy comedy entertainment: telling and hearing stories is perhaps the most significant leisure activity. The folktales varied from place to place – Biesele noted: "the student of [San] folklore [cannot] make many generalizations about their oral traditions" (in Lee & DeVore, 1998: 304-5). She notes that the !Kung concept of God is different from Christianity, so avoids using the term 'God' in translations. In the stories, animal ancestors are anthropomorphised to the extent that their kinship with humans is presumed. This applies not only to valued mammals such as the eland but also to insects such as the mantis. Life is viewed as a respectful interplay between creatures, reflecting the positive relationships in human community.

Hans-Joachim Heinz (Heinz & Lee, 1978:117-9), a German scientist with a Bushman wife, described two deities, a distant but benevolent creator Guthe, and the less predictable Thoa. Disagreements between them explain why life is uncertain – why some people survive illness, and why lions kill some people and not others. Guthe does not

always get his own way. The spirits of the dead go to work for Guthe and Thoa, before returning to physical life. Thoa caused jealousy and tensions, and especially had to be kept away from women: the trance dance (pp. 212-4) drove evil away and rooted out any underlying tensions. The San lived, ate, slept and played in close communities, with very little privacy. Harmony – disharmony dualism was therefore a crucial dynamic, depicted by Guthe – Thoa duality. Guthe is tradition, the initiator, and so conservative. Thoa is radical, the pressure for change, the source therefore of arguments. The tension between these tendencies, dramatised by the stories, is helpful if kept in proportion and balance. Kramer (1995:304-7, 320-1) emphasised the ambiguity and liminality of Bushman thinking, fluid, in between, and 'along edges' through existential thresholds[5] (1995:17)

Elizabeth Marshall Thomas was brought up with the !Kung San alongside her anthropologist mother, Lorna Marshall (see especially Marshall, 1999). She described camp life (1959) and later, in more detail, she noted (2006:255ff) how her mother used to discuss the stars and constellations with an old who described a huge constellation, wholly visible only once a year, called Tshxum, resembling a horned beast protecting the earth Lorna Marshall (1999: 264-8) later gave more detail of the same story, linking the constellation with The Pleiades (= Tshxum), with Canopus and Capella being the horns. Interpreting the night sky through story is a key part of San spirituality. The stars in the sky give rise to imagination, stories that make the constellations predictable. They knew when to tell Lorna Marshall that the horns were visible. The sun was not revered but considered a danger to protect oneself from. The two main deities were horizon deities, one in the east, the other in the west. These gods do not punish (Thomas, 2006:261) though to displease them can have unpleasant consequences, just like stepping on an adder. The San do not interfere with nature to avoid accidental dangerous consequences. The San were generally aware of what the deities liked and disliked. Good or bad consequences could come from accidentally getting in the deity's way, and the San were concerned to plot a favourable course for their lives. Stories told of deities being bullied, harried and tricked, showing that coming out on top is not a matter of compliant worship. The gods are an intrusive layer of existence: their actions explain why things go wrong, and if you are lucky, you might see it happening in time to dodge. ≠Gao N!a (the greater god) was tricked by his wives; //Gauwa was feared as god of death. After reaching //Gauwa, spirits are said to continue to age, but develop long straight hair (unlike the Bushmen's tight curls). People, and some animals, were said to have an inner energy or *n!ow* (Thomas, 2006:268). One person's energy interacts with others and with things around like the fire and creates a complex web of consequences. This is explanatory rather than useful, for people did not attempt to change their fortune by experimenting with *n!ow*.

 We need to exorcise the missionary influence, and especially their models of animism and totemism, before we can glimpse indigenous thought processes. They saw their world and the skies not scientifically but mythologically. The San knew the material world very well – they knew animal behaviour, tracks, the signs of nature, the seasons and sources of food. In a sense, their physical world was predictable: tracks led to the animals they expected; the roots they knew grew where they should. There are however other powers at work and dangers that knew they had to avoid, and they described these through

elemental myths. Aspects of the world – the wind, the weather, the heavens – were personified. These could be tricksters that people needed to second-guess. Life is unpredictable and only the wise and cunning survive. The sun, lack of prey or plant food, and disease could kill. These dangers were storied. A hunt could end in success or failure: what made the difference? What caused some things to happen, and other things not to? If everything that happens is meant to happen, then someone *causes it*. So there are forces beyond our understanding. There is a spirit within us – the dead don't disappear, but the ghost/spirit has its own existence. In seeking to answer these concerns, the San were not being more primitive or any more pre-scientific than the average under-educated westerner, but they were in their own terms clearly observing and analysing what they experienced.

Living communally without privacy means that psychological pressures are also real – jealousy, selfishness, abuse of power – so are visualised and reified as evil spirits to be controlled and exorcised through the trance-dance, which then has therapeutic value and happens every few days. Lorna Marshall (1999: 63-90) provides a detailed study. Elizabeth Thomas (2006:272) notes that they called the illness that is healed through trance "star sickness":

> "the force that pervades a group of people and causes dissent and jealousy, anger and quarrels and failures of gift giving – the evils that drive people apart and damage the unity that is life itself on the savannah. Physical illnesses are bad, but star sickness is worse, and it was this that the trancing men flung back to the surrounding spirits, they who were waiting just beyond the firelight".

Generally it is men who trance and dance, the women participating by singing and clapping. These demons are visualised in the trance, and the entranced men cast them out from the women, so the performance is gendered, like a reconciliation after a row, only timed to prevent the row in the first place. The dance as a source of healing was explored by Richard Katz, et al. (1997) who describe the dance as celebratory, joyful and deeply healing in general (p.xiii). They commented,

> "Healing is based on *n/om*, a spiritual substance or energy residing in the bellies of the men and women who have been taught to activate it. N/om is said to 'boil' when the people dance strenuously or sing the healing songs strongly; it leaves their stomachs and travels up their spines and out of their fingers, where it may be used to heal by the laying on of hands. The Ju!'hoan people highly respect those who dare to feel the pain experienced when healing and the synchronized presence of the whole community celebrates the healing power's existence.

Katz elsewhere (in Lee and DeVore, 1998: 281-301) calls this !Kia-Healing, an ability available to all, male and female, but mastered only by half of the population after a process of education. To have a good imagination and a head for fantasy is said to be important. He calls this 'transcendence', even though his whole description is of an experience from within, moving up the spine until the !Kia state is reached. In this state, people can walk on hot coals, talk with spirits, and claim to see great distances and even have X-ray vision. It is viewed less as going beyond oneself, as discovering one's real self deep down. It may relate to what Ioan Lewis (1971) called 'ecstatic religion', emerging from stress and poverty; Thomas DuBois (2009: 109-132) to be sure finds trance used by shamans worldwide.

Their stories show that they had a penchant for fantasy. People became animals, and animals people. A boy, looked at by a menstrual girl, became a tree. He was still a boy, yet seen as a tree *and believed in some way to be so.* In trance, the "seers" became animals and birds, and travelled to other regions. To trance is to see mystically, whether spirits, or sickness arrows, or far-off regions. Others were interested to talk about what had been seen when the trance was over. The artist sees non-material insights which come across as true; writers similarly see their characters and try to depict them faithfully. The reader engages with fiction and fantasy deep in the brain having suspended disbelief. San experiences are no less true than these. They deconstruct human anxieties and tensions, visualise them and defeat them. It is part of our human heritage, a shaman experience found everywhere (Eliade, 1972; Neylan, 2003:29; DuBois, 2009: 109-132). Spirits may not be 'real', but it is true that jealousy and depression can kill, whether we differently describe this as a police officer, psychologist or storyteller.

A site of spiritual struggle: an application of Paul Ricoeur..
The early colonists had a low regard for aboriginal practices and beliefs, viewing these as heathenism, paganism and animism. However, the supernaturalist assumptions of the religion they imported, Christianity, validated the ideas of the indigenous peoples about the supernatural power of witches, demons, spirits and ancestors. Translating the Bible into local languages brought about a fusion, a syncrenism, between African and biblical teachings. The apparent reality of demons, spirits and witches left a legacy of war between light and darkness, a dualism of good and evil which could mislabel indigenous spiritualities like the San. Once African people could take ownership of their version of Christianity, membership greatly expanded. The San were, however, a hard to reach minority for missionaries, but met instead an academic elite interested in San traditions.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur applied hermeneutic ideas to spirituality in *Figuring the Sacred* (1995). For him, there is an intellectual conflict between being a rational philosopher and believing in God, which he resolves in the notion of *ultimate concern* (1995: 46-7). The spiritual core lies on this view deep within human experience. In a paper on Naming God (1995:217-235), he expounds Christianity, but his philosophical case can apply also to San spirituality.

- He starts with *presupposition* that theology (or spirituality) is *meaningful* so it is right to look philosophically for meaning.
- Secondly, *text*. The naming of God (that is, defining spiritual meaning) has already taken place in texts from the past. A text (written or oral) has scribed inner experience into words, and by doing so it has become *discourse*. Writing fossilises spoken words; written words are brought back into the domain of speech through performance (reading, preaching). Discourse is *about something*, the *referent*. Discourse about God refers to something, the words being closely linked to experience. Language about God is really putting experiences into words. Each passage (within and across religions) tells a different story ('polyphony'), preachers have different motives and experiences, and each reader brings different experiences to the reading. The text is not 'revealed'; some discussion of themes might be considered 'inspired'. San story comments on life

experiences, commenting on mysteries such as why people die, why weather happens, why food is scarce, and why people are as they are. These mysteries control San life, and are not to be taken lightly.

- Thirdly, *poetics*, or language celebrating itself. "Poetic discourse … refers to our many ways of belonging to the world", the modalities of *rootedness* and *belonging to* (222). We will miss this if we limit ourselves to a positivist view of reality based on verification and falsification. Poetry expresses what cannot be expressed by scientific description. In poetry, including story, understanding is revealed, and light dawns,.

- Fourthly, *polyphony*. There are many voices, none privileged. Each should be heard for its own sake, with respect. None should be censored because they disagree with a pre-determined script. The versions of deity and ultimate meaning implied in San stories are part of the universal poetic expression of ultimate human meaning.

- Fifthly, *limit-expressions*. Language about God cannot become knowledge, since it is about infinitude and mystery. Spirituality is the language of metaphor and simile, not knowledge. To understand these stories *as fact* (that is, knowledge), is an error. Christianity and San share a view of divine weakness: the Christian God died on a cross, the opposite of a view of God in total control. San stories are of tricking the Powers that be, secular and sacred, into making human life comfortable. Both recognise that belief in a Deity does not simplify life. Life is a mess in an out-of-control world.

- Sixthly, is it a *poem of God or of Christ* – indeed, or of Vishnu, or ≠Gao N!a. There is surely a poem of San deity to be uncovered that is pertinent to life experience.

- Seventhly, *poetics and politics*. Poetry opens up a new non-ordinary world which helps readers to understand themselves more clearly. Poetry about God *remakes the world*. Self understanding is defined by this constructed poetic world. Hermeneutic dialogue presupposes that neither the writer's nor the reader's voice is privileged. In an African context, the poetry of deity remakes, or redefines the worldview, and enables people to consider their self understanding on that basis. To cast out such poetics as infantile and foolish, and to attempt to replace with another account (equally foolish) from a different set of experiences, is both futile and oppressive. It can only lead to loss of self esteem and agency, followed by meaningless and inauthentic attempts to be obedient to a powerful other. Attempts to subvert this process back to the authentic (whether syncretism or syncrenism) can only be applauded.

I have refocused Ricoeur's analysis to San spirituality to underline the value of rational commentary and hermeneutics that we need to attempt if we assume there is meaning to be found. Spirituality exists where ultimate concerns are considered and expressed. Dealing with greed, jealousy, ambition, aggression, anger, and promoting love, care, altruism, and harmony are deeply rooted – and these are central components in the trance dance. Negative impulses may be visualised as spirits and demons, and chased away – this need not be reduced to supernaturalism but be linked with poetic imagery. To drive away jealousy, it may help to visualise it.

Conclusion.

The human race are storytellers and use stories to express deep concerns from their inner experience. Fiction is hugely popular for this reason. We commenced our discussion by proposing that ethno-spirituality, the expression of ultimate concerns regarding the human condition, be taken seriously and become the object of unbiased study. This article demonstrates that the missionary agenda had had a number of effects – to declare ethno-spirituality unworthy; to declare imagery as idolatry, and visualisation as superstition. Also, by identifying indigenous deities with the devil, missionaries validated belief in a devil with all the power and attractiveness of the indigenous deity.

The hard to evangelise San escaped the worst of this superstition-promoting syncretism. San spirituality has been examined through myths and the practice of trance dance. There are regional and linguistic variations, and some principles of interpretation are developed, emphasising existential concerns rather than supernatural beliefs. It is argued that existential concerns help us also to understand the healing nature of the trance dance. Through Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics regarding the sacred, rational and existential interpretations of myth and ritual are encouraged. This extends Ricoeur's approach beyond Christianity, and exposes the folly of confusing poetic imagery either with fact or with superstition. There is a need for future study of poetic imagery expressing ultimate concerns.

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[1] Translated with the inaccurate title *The Idea of the Holy* (Otto, 1917) – holiness is described as real, not an idea.

[2] The past tense is deliberate.

[3] By evolutionism I refer to a range of extensions of Darwin's biological theory to society, such as by E.B. Tylor.

[4] Stories 'collected' by Laurens van der Post were mostly quoted or misquoted from the Bleek's published books. Van der Post treated the San as *his Bushmen* and as children with childish ideas. After Jung, the Bushmen helped his search for the child within himself and for the child within society; their unsophisticated closeness to nature is something he argued all humanity should strive for. He disapproved of scholars studying Bushmen society. His biographer J.D.F. Jones commented: "he made their sad story his own…In a word, he colonised them" (2001:215). He idealised their way of life so that their best interest was obscured – that is, sympathetic education which valued their culture but broadened their horizons, taught them skills and encouraged them to understand their own lives and stories as valuable and insightful.

[5] This owes much to the work of Victor Turner (1969) on liminality (the in-between state), and ritual thresholds sich as rites of passage. I have reviewed this elsewhere (Bigger, 2009).